The Missing Q.C.’s by John Oxenham

The great doorway of the Law Courts resembled the entrance to a gigantic bee-hive, with the bees swarming round and furtively working their way in against the out-coming stream.

A black swarm of drones lined both sides of the Strand as far as Temple Bar on the one hand, and St. Clement's Danes on the other, and kept close speculative and commentative watch on all comers. Carriages and hansoms dashed up, and their occupants sprang out and plunged into the ingoing throng. Barristers in wigs and gowns were reduced to the level of ordinary folk, and had to elbow it with the rest.

Now and again the stalwart guardians of the inner doors brought down their stony official gaze to the level of the crowd, pushed open the swinging valves with great show of deference and obsequious touch of helmet, and ushered in one or other of the great leaders of the Bar. Then the whisper buzzed round that that was Mr. Peacock, Q.C., that Sir Charles Dossall, that the Attorney-General, and so on.

The smaller men flaunted themselves in wigs and gowns, and ridiculous bibs and tuckers, and faces of infinite gravity and importance. These greater stars, in ordinary attire, passed on serenely to their robing-rooms, and strove to appear unconscious of the eyes that were upon them.

From the crowd kicking its heels against the kerb-stones in the Strand, to the crowd already mopping its beady brow on the back benches of Court No. 99, all was excited expectancy.

It was a great case. A world-wide reputation was at stake. For five whole days all the world had been ringing with the report of it. When the Court adjourned the previous night, the curtain fell on a most dramatic situation, and public excitement was at fever-heat.

The evening papers had procured new letters of the most bulgy and striking character for their contents bills, regardless of expense. The New York papers cabled out verbatim reports, and came out with head-lines which ran down half a column. The Petit Journal, in Paris, had actually given the case two whole columns.

The Attorney-General, Sir Revel Revell, and a brilliant array of Q.C.'s represented the plaintiff; Sir Charles Dossall, Mr. Peacock, Q.C., and various juniors, were fighting the defendant's case, and fighting it magnificently.

The plaintiff was a man whose name was a household word, from one point of view or another, throughout the world. Charges of the gravest character—charges of financial fraud of the worst description— had been made against him, and here he was at last in the box, to the intense surprise of many, driven thereto by the forces majeures of the situation—nominally the accuser, actually the accused—fighting for his life and all that made that life worth the living.

The betting in the clubs had been five to two against his appearing, from which one might gather that among his fellows, at all events, he was already prejudged and condemned.

But here he was, pale and still, with a face like a flint; and only the pulse in his temple showing those nearest to him the intensity of his emotions. His eyes never flinched; his very jaw was motionless, and gave no indication of the tight-clenched teeth within ; only that little throbbing pulse in the white temple showed what was going on inside.

Throughout the whole of the previous day Sir Charles had subjected the plaintiff to the searching fire of his keen cross-examination—an art of which he was the acknowledged master—and on the whole the witness had stood it fairly well.

Towards the close, however, Sir Charles suddenly developed a new line—tentatively, as it seemed

to some of the Bar who were following with closest attention every word and expression, both of counsel and and finally he launched at the man in the box one question which paled his cheek, and shook him as he stood and clenched his fingers white in their grip on the sides of the witness-box, and caused the perspiring spectators to hold their breath for the answer, and flung the Bar into a high fever of excitement.

The heavy, fetid atmosphere of the court crystallised into an electric silence, and startled the very judges into a sudden assumption of wide-eyed attention.

The silence was accentuated, rather than broken, by an occasional cold, sharp word from Sir Charles as the witness attempted to fence with the pitiless question.

But Sir Charles would have none of it; with him there was no evasion. His point faced his victim remorselessly; he held him to it as a master of the duello holds his opponent at the point of his blade and provokes the answering thrust or delivers the death-blow.

The plaintiff relapsed into stony silence: the spectators waited open-mouthed, all a-bristle with excitement; the Court waited. Sir Charles waited, launching his questions now and again, short and sharp as revolver-shots, every unanswered question carrying to every mind present all the conviction of the damnatory answer Sir Charles required, every shot going home to the heart of that great reputation.

It was pitiful, pitiless; but it was magnificent and tragic. It was like watching a stately castle in flames. It had all the horrible piquancy of an execution.

"Answer me, sir," at length said Sir Charles, in tones of steel. "If I keep you here all night I will have the answer to my question."

And at length the answer came—broken and faltering.

An answer that produced a special hieroglyphic on each of the judges' notes, that blanched the face of the Attorney-General with angry dismay, that set the spectators and the Bar quivering with impatience for the next.

Then Sir Charles quietly gathered together his few notes and intimated that if it pleased their lordships he would continue his cross-examination of the witness on the morrow, and the crowded court hummed with excitement like a harried hive whence the honey has been snatched, and slowly, very slowly, the audience trickled out into the street. And the impatient mob outside took up the news and buzzed it along, and stood in knots discussing it, and devouring the few words in the evening papers which already, by means of six-inch-letter contents bills, announced "Startling Admissions by the Plaintiff," and were selling for six times their usual price as fast as the boys could hand them out.

It was a point boldly taken and admirably made, and did Sir Charles's well-known dramatic instincts credit. The excitement next morning was greater than ever. The entrance to the Law Courts was no longer a bee-hive, it was an ant-hill swarming with ants fighting for standing room in Court No. 99. And on every tongue and in every eye was the question—

"Will the plaintiff face Sir Charles again?"

"Will he toe the line?"

"Will he come up to the scratch?"

"Has he bolted?"

A sigh, compounded of satisfaction at sight of him and admiration of his pluck, went round as the unhappy personage in question stalked gloomily into court and took his seat by his counsel, with the set white face of one preparing for the rack, and for the worst.

"He's a good plucked one, he is," was the opinion of the gallery.

"His ideas of right and wrong may be somewhat off colour, but he's got nerve, anyhow," said the body of the court.

"Cool devil," said the Junior Bar.

And they all settled themselves comfortably for the enjoyment of a morning's vivisection.

It seemed as though the judges were never coming. They strained even the judicial privilege of latitude in the matter of punctuality. But at last their door opened. The usher bustled in, fiddled round the Chief Justice's desk with a finishing touch, flung back the curtains with a noisy rattle, and in they came, settled into their seats after the usual formalities, and the great case got under way again.

The public, satisfied that the plaintiff was there, had missed the fact that one of the most important personages in the anticipated entertainment had not yet arrived. All their thoughts and fears had been concentrated on the victim. They had not noticed that his executioner was absent.

Mr. Peacock, Q.C., fidgeted nervously, settled his wig, unsettled his bib, pulled round the lapel of his gown on one side, then on the other, and then hung despairingly on to it with both hands, and swung round every half-minute to eye the dooi with a face in which surprise, annoyance, and perplexity were equally blended. The judges waited, glancing in surprise at the vacant seat on the counsel's bench; and at last Mr. Peacock rose, red and nervous, bowed to the Lord Chief Justice, and said—

"M' lud—yourludships—er—er—might I request—er-—er—few minutes' delay—et —er—Sir Charles has not yet arrived, m' lud—er—er—no idea of the reason. I have sent down to his chambers—er—er— most extraordinary, m' lud."

The Lord Chief Justice bowed suavely.

"I hope nothing has happened to Sir Charles. We will await the return of your messenger, Mr. Peacock."

"I thank you, m' lud."

Mr. Peacock bowed gratefully and sat down, the personification of annoyance and perplexity. The judges turned in their seats to discuss the latest society scandal. The members of the Bar joked and growled. The spectators whispered. Mr. Peacock, Q.C., fidgeted nervously, one eye on the clock and one on the door.

At last the curtains round the door were agitated, and Mr. Peacock's clerk appeared heated and panting, his face charged with importance. He was accompanied by an elderly man whom many recognised as Sir Charles Dossall's confidential clerk.

A short whispered conversation took place between the three, and then Mr. Peacock rose with a look of amazement on his face.

"M' lud, your ludships, I fear we must —er—claim the indulgence of the Court. What has happened to Sir Charles I cannot say. I learn that he—er—went out last night after a lengthy sitting with myself, and has not since been seen or heard of. Sir Charles's clerk is here" (Sir Charles's clerk bowed, but was covered with confusion when he found that no one took any notice of him), "and informs me that he has been to Sir Charles's house and found Lady Dossall in—er—er—an agony of apprehension as to what can have become of him. Perhaps your ludships would advise me what to do under the circumstances."

The judges conferred together. The Bar indulged in jokes of various shades at Sir Charles's expense. The public sat eager and curious, awaiting developments.

The Lord Chief Justice spoke at last.

"With the consent of the other side, Mr. Peacock, we will adjourn till to-morrow, when we hope Sir Charles may be able to be present."

The Attorney-General rose, and said, blandly—

"Under the circumstances, my lord, we consent to the adjournment. I trust I may be permitted to join in the hope that nothing untoward has happened to my esteemed friend Sir Charles, and that he will be able to be with us to-morrow."

The crowd poured out, excitedly discussing the situation. Mr. Peacock conferred with his juniors and some fellow Q.C.'s, with the result that five minutes later a dozen hansoms were speeding in various directions, all having the same end in view —the discovery of the missing leader.

"Well, Charlie, what do you make of it ?" asked the Attorney-General, slipping his arm through that of Charlie Dallas, one of Ins juniors in the case, as they left the court together.

"Hanged if I know what to make of it, Sir Revel. What do you think yourself?"

"There are a hundred possible explanations, my boy, but probably the hundred-and-first will prove the correct one. We shall probably know to-morrow—by the way, Millicent is expecting you up to-night. She asked me to tell you to come early."

Next morning Court 99 was again crowded to suffocation.

The papers had given no explanation and no information of importance. In the first place, they had none to give; in the second place, one might almost have imagined, from their very brief reference to the subject, that word had been passed round to touch as lightly on the subject as possible.

Word had been conveyed to the judges that nothing had yet been heard of Sir Charles, but they felt it necessary to give Mr. Peacock the opportunity of proceeding in the absence of his leader, if he chose to avail himself of it.

But when the Lord Chief Justice, on entering, glanced at the counsel's bench, he saw, to his surprise, that Mr. Peacock himself had not yet put in an appearance.

This was going too far, and he made the clerk call the case.

Then came a pause. The clerk might call, but there was no Sir Charles, and no Mr. Peacock.

Mr. Vincent Coyle, Q.C., a young Irish barrister who had taken silk only six months before, seemed to be in sole charge of the defence.

After a brief reference to his papers, the Lord Chief Justice bowed graciously to Mr. Coyle and asked, with gentle irony— "Shall we proceed, Mr. Coyle?"

Mr. Coyle had been on pins and needles for many minutes past, and now he sprang to his feet.

"M'lud, your ludships, I do not know what to make of it at ahl "—in his nervousness he had almost added a second " at ahl," but managed to bite it off just in time. "Sir Charles has not, as your lordship is aware, turned up—er—I mean—come home —er—reappeared yet. But what has become of Mr. Peacock—I cannot——"

At this juncture Mr. Peacock's clerk came elbowing through the throng about the door, and made his way towards Mr. Coyle.

Mr. Coyle's eye brightened, and he looked hopefully in the rear of the clerk for signs of Mr. Peacock. But the curtain had fallen over the door, the ruffled crowd had closed up again, and every eye was fixed on the heated and self-conscious clerk.

"Have I your lordship's indulgence for one moment?" asked Mr. Coyle, and bent to speak angrily to

the clerk.

"Where the dickens is Mr. Peacock, Simmonds? Surely, when he knew Sir Charles was not here, he might have made a point of being in time. Here am I, left——"

"Mr. Peacock went out last night, and has not come back, Mr. Coyle. He has not been home, and we can get no news of him."

"The devil!" burst audibly from Mr. Vincent Coyle's lips, as he sank limply into his seat and gazed bewilderedly first at the clerk and then at the Bench. Then, with a rake at his wig, he struggled up on to his feet, looked helplessly at their lordships, and said—

"M' luds, Mr. Peacock disappeared last night, and no trace can they find of him."

And then he sat down again, and drummed with his fingers on the desk as though to signify that he gave the matter up as a very bad job. There it was, and they were at liberty to make the best of it.

Even their lordships seemed staggered; they retired to confer together. The eyes and ears of the public were strained to bursting point.

A sense of intense nervous excitement filled the court. The more frivolous members of the Junior Bar attempted to work it off with a few ill-timed jokes.

"Peacock's funked it."

"Never would have thought it of old Pea."

"If it had been the Attorney-General, now," said one irreverent, "one could have understood it."

"Coyle, me bhoy, you have yourself watched," said another; "you're the next on the string."

The public, too, found voice, and, waiving even the ceremony of introduction, discussed the singular situation every man with his neighbour, and strange, wild ideas were wafted about.

The judges entered again, and settled in their places with all the ruffled stateliness of sitting hens suddenly disturbed while on business.

"You are not prepared to go on, Mr. Coyle?"

"I am not, m' lud," said Mr. Coyle with gloomy emphasis.

His lordship bowed to the Attorney-General, who rose with a sweeping swirl of his gown.

"My lord, we might, I presume, claim a verdict, as our opponents are still unprepared to proceed with their case. But, personally, I should much regret taking a course which, while perfectly legal, might not be considered by the world at large as satisfying the course of justice. We leave the matter entirely in your lordship's hands."

"That is very right and proper, Mr. Attorney, and under the circumstances I see nothing for it but to adjourn again. We will take the case this day week."

"If you please, my lord."

The Attorney-General sat down, but sprang up like a highly ornamental Jack-in-the-box.

"One other matter may I mention, my lord? Rumours and whispers reach my ears, even in this

court, to the effect that my client knows something about or is in some way responsible for

the mysterious absence of Sir Charles Dossall and Mr. Peacock. May I state to your lordships most emphatically, if indeed any such assurance is necessary, that my client is as much in the dark in this matter as your lordships' own selves?"

"Your assurances are quite unnecessary, Mr. Attorney, and," added his lordship, standing, and

speaking with additional impressiveness from that fact, "let me say that should it be proved that anyone whatsoever has been in this matter endeavouring to defeat the course of justice the penalty will be commensurate with the enormity of the offence."

Their lordships retired, and the crowd burst out along the passages and into the streets almost before the curtain had dropped on the tail of the last judicial gown, and every tongue wagged its freest. Now indeed busy pens were plied. The matter could no longer be covered up. The papers were full of the mysterious disappearances, and speculation, suggestion, and rumour had full play.

Three days later Dallas and his friend Godfrey Cox were idly knocking the balls about in the tennis ground in the Temple Gardens. It was an off day with them. They had many off days in the summer weather. The tennis courts by the river offered infinitely greater attractions than .he courts across the way.

Sauntering down the path towards them came Vincent Coyle, in wig and gown as usual. His friends said Vincent wore his wig on all possible occasions for purely personal reasons. In fact, these friendly enemies, of whom, being a hot-headed Irishman, he had many, averred that he wore his wig in the nature of a disguise, and for the purpose of escaping for a time from the embarrassment of the shock of fiery red hair which was his most startling outward characteristic. Some of them even asserted that Vincent's wig was built to order especially low over the ears and deep in the neck for this very purpose.

"Well, Coyle, what is the news?" queried Dallas. "Any word yet of the missing men?"

"Div'l a word," said Coyle, cheerily. "What's come of those two men passes mortal comprehension."

"No attempt on you yet?" asked Cox.

"Not one, faith," said Coyle, who, when off duty, sustained his patriotism by a villainous cultivation of the brogue. "But sayriously, bhoys, it's no matter for joking, this. I was up seeing Lady Dossall yestherday, and the poor thing is almost demented."

"Good chance for you, Coyle," said Cox, "if Sir Charles should unfortunately never reappear. They say she's very pretty."

"Very pretty and very young, and in great disthress," replied Vincent, soberly. "What do you suppose is at the bottom of it, Dallas? Is it murder, or kidnapping, or what?"

"I'm utterly at sea, Coyle, and so is Scotland Yard. I was up at the House last night with Sir Revel. He came out with the Home Secretary, and they both seemed worried to death. In both cases the procedure seems to have been much the same. Both men had got home for the night. Both started out again, leaving word they would be back shortly, and not a trace of them is found."

"What took them out again?"

"Can't say. In Sir Charles's case I believe a letter was handed in, and presumably he went out in answer to it. Whether Peacock received one also we have not yet learnt."

Just then there drove rapidly up the central drive a victoria drawn by a handsome pair of bays. Dallas started, then leaped the railing, and hurried towards it. The carriage stopped as the coachman recognised him.

A delicately gloved hand was stretched out towards him, and a lovely face with a cloud upon it greeted him.

"Oh, Charley, how glad I am to see you! I didn't know what on earth to do or where to go, now I had got here."

"Why, Milly, what's up? What brought you here? You didn't come for a game of tennis in that

costume?"

"Oh, Charley, we're in such trouble. Mother's worrying to death. Father went out suddenly last night, leaving word he would be back in a short time, and he's never come back yet."

"What?" almost yelled Dallas. "Sir Revel, too? Why, I was with him at the House at eleven last night."

"Yes, it was after he came in. Oh, Charley, what is it? What is wrong?"

"Nothing, dear—at least, I hope not. You were going to Sir Revel's chambers to inquire. Wait here. I will run round, and be back in five minutes."

He came back with a heavier heart than he had known for many a day.

"Sir Revel is not in, Milly. You did quite right in coming; but drive back home now, dear, and I will call round later, and bring your father with me, I hope. Tell Lady Revel not to worry; a public man's time is not quite his own, you know."

"Oh, I am so glad I met you, Charley! Do bring him home early, or mother will worry herself sick. Good-bye."

Dallas raised his hat, and the bays dashed away.

He stood for a second with the radiance of her presence still in his eyes; then his face shut down into a heavy frown, and he strode back to his friends.

"Lucky Charles," said Cox, as he approached. "But why arrange meetings in the open air? I understood Papa Revel was quite agreeable, and that everything was all cut, and dried, and signed, sealed, and delivered, bar the actual ceremony. Why, Dallas, what's wrong?"

"Sir Revel has disappeared; he went out suddenly last night, and has never returned."

Coyle tore off his wig, and rushed like a meteor away under the arches towards his chambers.

"Really, Charley?"

"Really, Cox. Millicent came down here to see if her father was at his chambers. Good heaven! what is the meaning of it all?"

And now indeed the newspapers had things all their own way. It would, perhaps, be too much to say that the word-spinners of the Press revelled in the mystery, but they certainly made much of it. They built Pyramids and Sphinxes with the flimsiest of bricks, containing the smallest possible amount of straw, and they did well out of it. As for the newsboys, they reaped such a harvest that they would willingly have sacrificed every Q.C. in the land to keep up the excitement.

When late that night one small fiend ran up the Strand, yelling, "Dis'pearance of 'Torney-Gen'ral!" and holding a poster like this in front of him—

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

OF THE

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

he sold out his whole stock at sixpence each before he reached Wellington Street, and anathematised his want of faith in human nature which had prevented him from laying in a double supply.

This was the climax. The Attorney-General was to have delivered a great speech in the House that night. He had disappeared in the wake of Mr. Peacock and Sir Charles Dossall.

What did it all mean? That was the question the whole country—and the whole world—was asking.

What did it mean?

Charles Dallas had a hard time of it. He haunted Scotland Yard for information of the missing men, but Scotland Yard had no information to give—forbore even to cover up its want of success with the usual air of mystery, and confessed itself absolutely in fault. The rest of the time was passed in cudgelling his own brains and his friends' for possible solutions of the mystery, and in calling at Cadogan Place to keep Lady Revel and Millicent posted as to the latest moment up to which no news had arrived.

Lady Revel received him each time with fresh outbursts of grief. Millicent welcomed him with reproachful wonder, and plainly showed that she expected him to produce Sir Revel without fail on his next visit. She even once went the length of indulging in the uttermost extreme of feminine reproach—" I can not understand it, Charley. Nothing seems to be being done. Oh, if I were a man!"

"But, Milly dear, nothing can be done. There is not a shred of a clue to work upon."

"I don't want shreds of clues. I want my father!"

Dallas grew hollow-eyed and haggard.

Between the devil and the deep sea, as typified by the misery at Cadogan Place and the unfathomable mystery which was clouding all their lives, he had a very bad time of it indeed.

His nights were sleepless, and his days full of worry.

Meanwhile, the public were amazed and indignant. That three prominent men could disappear from their midst, as though the earth had opened and swallowed them up, and no one be even arrested for it, was altogether too much.

The police were perplexed and wrathful; and headquarters only put up with Dallas, and his sometimes overheated words (this would be on his return from an unusually unpleasant quarter of an hour in Cadogan Place), because they knew him, and liked him, and understood his trouble.

One afternoon he was walking rapidly along the Embankment towards New Scotland Yard—his second visit that day—when from an open carriage, driving rapidly towards him, a young man waved a cheery salute with his glove. Dallas's gloomy eyes were fixed on vacancy, and did not catch the signal. In a moment the carriage whirled round, and shot up alongside of him.

"Dallas?"

Charley turned and looked vacantly at the occupant of the carriage for a moment; then, recognising him, he warmly grasped the outstretched hand.

"Why, Jellicoe, is it you?"

"Very much so, my boy. Where are you going? Jump in, and I'll take you there."

Dallas hesitated, then stepped in.

"Whereto?"

"Scotland Yard, please," and the carriage rolled on.

"And why to Scotland Yard, if one may ask without nosing into a professional secret? Going to give yourself up? What's it for?"

"No secret, Jellicoe ; I half live at Scotland Yard at present."

"May I ask why? It never struck me as a particularly attractive caravanserai."

"Why, man alive! don't you know that Sir Revel Revell"

"Oh, I know all about Sir Revel."

"You do ?" shouted Charley.

"All about his disappearance, I mean. Don't get excited, my boy—you nearly made the horses bolt that time! What has Sir Revel got to do with you?

"Why—oh, of course, you don't know— it's so long since I've seen you. Well, you see, I am engaged to Sir Revel's daughter, and you can understand that the family is in a terrible way about this matter, and they seem to think—well— hang it!—every time I call, and that's at least once a day—twice some days—I feel as though it was my fault that Sir Revel had not been found."

"I understand; nasty position—very. Shall I tell you something else, Dallas?"

"Yes, what?"

"The next to disappear—or to break down, at all events—will be Charles Dallas. Man, you look terrible! You must stop it. You can't stand the strain." He had been examining his friend with a keen professional eye.

"Yes, I feel fairly played out," said Dallas, sinking wearily back on the cushions.

The carriage drove up to Scotland Yard.

Dallas sprang out, and stretched out his hand to say good-bye.

"No," said Jellicoe, "I'll wait. I'm going to prescribe for you."

Dallas was back in a couple of minutes. "No news?" said Jellicoe. "Well, jump in, my boy, we'll have a spin round the park—it'll do you good, and I want to talk to you."

Dallas stepped in, and they were whirled away.

"Now, look here, Dallas," said Jellicoe, "I speak with authority. Do you know what I am?"

Dallas shook his head gloomily. "Well, since we met last—it must be a year, at least—I have made a big move. You know I always had a taste for the investigation of brain diseases?"

Dallas nodded, and the shadow of a smile flickered on his face at the recollection of certain episodes at Oxford.

"Yes, I see you remember. Well, I pursued the same lines of study with some success, taking my degree. That, too, you know. But what you don't know is this: A year ago these investigations of mine brought me into contact with, and finally into very close intimacy with, Dyne— Sir James Dyne, the great specialist—and he finally made me an offer to join him in his work: and here I am. Now, for the moment, I am your medical adviser, and I say you have got to drop this business and get away, or you will pay for it in a way you won't like."

"I know, Jellicoe; you are quite right. But I simply can't go until this matter is put right."

"Well, my boy, be warned. You are heading straight for a complete break-up. Let us talk of something else."

Jellicoe did his best to get his friend away from himself for a time, but found it hard work.

"Come and dine with me to-night, Dallas, and then we'll go round and see Toole or Irving, or whatever you like best."

"Dear boy, I really couldn't. I'm completely in the dumps."

"I'm going to get you out before it is too late. Look here, now: To-morrow night the Most Worshipful Company of Apothecaries gives its annual grand feed. It is a most amusing experience; I want you to come with me —it will do you good."

"It is very good of you, Jellicoe; but really, old man, I——"

"Nonsense, my boy. How will it help matters if you go in for a bad attack of brain fever? I tell you you have got to let up and go slow, or I won't answer for consequences."

He looked so serious that Dallas felt shaken, and finally, with somewhat of an ill grace, he promised Jellicoe to join him the following night.

The Worshipful Company and its guests were working steadily and stolidly through the ponderous menus, and Jellicoe was in the highest of spirits, rattling away as though diseases of the brain existed not, and mentally patting himself on the back at the slightly less gloomy expression on his friend's face.

The dinner was half done when the vacant chair on Dallas's left hand was suddenly filled by a late arrival, who nodded genially to Jellicoe as he took his seat, and to apparently half the occupants of the room as he unfolded his napkin.

He ate little, drank nothing but Burgundy, and was puffing his cigar among the first. Then Jellicoe leaned across Dallas, and said to the new comer—

"Sir James, permit me to introduce my old college chum, Charles Dallas, of the Junior Bar; Dallas, this is Sir James Dyne."

Dallas turned and encountered a pair of keen dark eves shining out of a wonderfully handsome, clear-cut, clean-shaven face, crowned with a mass of silky white hair.

"We have met before, Mr. Dallas," said the old man, bowing.

"Indeed, Sir James, I do not remember having had that pleasure."

"You were acting junior to Sir Revel Revell in Regina v. Pauld, were you not?"

"I was; I remember now," with a smile. "You have a keen eye, Sir James. If the judges only had as good a memory for juniors as you have"

"Yes, a keen eye and a keen memory are two of the essentials of my special branch of the profession. I am seventy-two, Mr. Dallas, but I do not forget much which I wish to remember."

The great specialist sipped his coffee, and continued—

"Sir Revel and I had a warm bout that day. I see you think he came off best, but he was absolutely wrong, Mr. Dallas, absolutely wrong, though he won his case."

Here they became aware that " Sir James Dyne—Sir James Dyne " was being loudly called upon to respond to some toast, and he rose to his feet. "Gentlemen!" Then in an aside to Jellicoe, "What on earth is the toast, Jellicoe?"

Jellicoe, almost suffocating with laughter, told him, and the old man launched into a speech that convulsed the room, made the tears run down the cheeks of the Worshipful Masters and Wardens, and left them rosy red and limply happy.

As he sat down he lit another cigar, and turned to Dallas.

"Excuse the interruption, Mr. Dallas. And now what is your theory of this mysterious disappearance of Sir Charles Dossall, Mr. Peacock, and Sir Revel?"

"That question was on the tip of my tongue to ask you, Sir James."

A humorous twinkle came into the keen dark eye. "Well, like everybody else, except the police, I suppose, I have my theory too, and, do you know, I think it will prove to be the right one." He beamed confidentially towards the young man, drew out his watch, half unintentionally as it seemed, and sprang up suddenly as he caught sight of the time. "Will you pardon my running away? I have an appointment which I shall barely manage to keep. Come down and see me at my place,

Mr. Dallas, at Barwood. I shall be delighted. Any Sunday you can spare the time. I dine at seven, sharp. Good-bye! Good-bye, Jellicoe !" and he was gone.

"Amusing old cuss, isn't he?" said Jellicoe, who had got past reverence point. "If he asks you down to his place, you go, Dallas; it will take you out of yourself, my boy. He has a wonderful establishment down there. I tackle the consultative and theoretical part of the business; Sir James handles the actual and desperate cases. For downright out-and-out mad loonies there never was a man like him."

"Do you often go down there?"

"Me? Never; if I can help it. It is interesting and all that, but one has to see so much of it that when I get the chance of an hour or two off, I get as far away from it as possible."

Next evening, Dallas received the following:—

“My dear Mr. Dallas,—

“I trust that you will believe me when I say that when I referred last night to Sir Revel Revell I had not the remotest idea that the matter was of more than ordinary interest to you; but I have since learned of your close connection with Sir Revel's family, and I am annoyed to think that any heedless words of mine may have added to the pain which this strange matter must be causing you.

"Pray accept my sincerest sympathy; and to show that you bear an old man no ill will, come down on Sunday and enliven my solitary table. Seven sharp. The carriage shall meet you at North Barwood Station by the 6.20 from Waterloo.

"Sincerely yours,

"James Dyne."

With the remembrance of Sir James's last words at the dinner still ringing in his ears, Dallas wrote accepting the invitation.

A fifteen-minutes' spin in the train, a rapid fifteen-minutes' drive through lovely lonely country lanes, prematurely darkened by the threatening of a storm, a panting halt while heavy iron gates were unlocked, a rapid passage up a long tree-lined approach, and Dallas was silently received by an ancient servitor in black silk stockings, with silky white hair, who handed his hat and coat to one of two stalwart footmen, and bowed the visitor into a small handsomely furnished room, half reception-room, half library.

As far as he could judge, the house seemed a very large one. The thing that struck him most was the absolute quiet, and the exquisite taste displayed in ill the appointments. Everything was rich and solid, and in perfect accord with Sir James Dyne's own impressive personality.

Sir James joined him almost instantly, and gave him warm greeting. "It was really very good of you to take pity on an old man's loneliness, Mr. Dallas—in the face of such a storm too," as a crash of thunder shook the house.

The low hum of a deep-toned gong rolled along the passages, and Sir James said, gaily—

"Let us to table at once. Everything here goes by clockwork, and if I am behind time the cook goes on sending up the courses, and I am the sufferer."

It was an admirable dinner, rendered doubly so by the old doctor's wonderful flow of anecdote and reminiscence. He knew something about everybody, and mostly to their detriment—that is, from the professional standpoint. Dallas found himself wondering at last if he himself were quite sane, or at all events whether, beyond himself and his host, there were any absolutely sane persons in existence.

The doctor evolved the theory that ninety-nine men out of a hundred are insane upon at least one subject, and that the way to cure them is, not by immuring them in asylums, but by a surgical operation which should deaden their susceptibilities upon the subject in question.

"Why you, yourself, Mr. Dallas, probably have some subject which touches you to the quick when you brood upon it. 'It makes you mad to think of it'—how commonly the expression is used; it is only a colloquialism, of course, but there is the germ of truth in it, as there is the germ of madness in every brain. Circumstances in some cases hatch out the germ, and so men go mad"— and so on and so on.

Of the Bar, Sir James seemed to hold no very high opinion. He proves satisfactorily to himself, that the Master of the Rolls was distinctly unsound in his upper strata, that at least two of the Lords Justices of Appeal were decided monomaniacs, and that the Lord Chief Justice was not far short of a drivelling idiot.

It was intensely amusing, and extremely interesting; for the doctor was a very clever man, and seemed to be exerting himself to the utmost in his guest's behalf.

Dallas had tried several times to bring round the conversation to the subject nearest his heart at the moment. But it was not till they were enjoying the after-dinner cigar that he succeeded in firing his question squarely into the doctor's batteries.

"Well now, Sir James, I want your theory as to the missing men. Where are they, and how did they get there?"

"Well, my dear boy," he said, slowly, "that question has exercised my mind in common with the rest of the world, and my theory is that they have been kidnapped."

"But, doctor! kidnapped in this nineteenth century?"

"Yes, I acknowledge all the difficulties of the case, but it seems to me the only possible explanation."

"But how?—why?—by whom?"

"Ah! that opens up a very wide field. How ?—the means would not be difficult to a determined man, The two latter questions hang together—answer the one and you solve the other. For instance, your client in the case had every reason to wish to stifle any further cross-examination by Sir Charles——"

"Yes; but he would hardly have made away with his own leader."

"That, of course, seems a difficulty— unless it were done as a blind."

Just then, the storm, which had been raging all through the dinner, culminated in one terrific crash, which caused both men to take their cigars from their mouths and hold their breath.

"Jove!" said the doctor, "that was heavy and close." He seemed restless. He got up and went to the window, and was met by a blinding flash.

"I think you must let me offer you a bed, Mr. Dallas; I couldn't think of letting you turn out in weather like this. Is there any necessity for your being back in town to-night — any early engagements for tomorrow?"

"None, doctor; but I wouldn't like to impose myself on you to that extent."

"Tut, tut; it is I who am under the obligation." He touched a button sunk in the floor under the table with his foot, and the old butler appeared.

"Oswald, have a room prepared for Mr. Dallas; he will stay the night."

The old man bowed and withdrew.

"An invaluable man that," said the doctor; "he has never spoken a word in his life. A clever fellow too. He was my coachman for over twenty years, and has been for twenty years my butler. I have often thought what an advantage it would be if there were a special race like that. No, he is not deaf, as you see; only dumb —born so."

The doctor was pacing the room restlessly, and the thunder was still rolling and crashing overhead.

"You will have to excuse me for a time, Mr. Dallas. A storm like this always has a bad effect on my patients. I shall make my nightly rounds earlier than usual, as I may be wanted—or stay," he said; "suppose you come with me—it will be an experience for you."

Dallas had no great inclination for the experience, but the doctor urged : " You may pick up some ideas that may come in useful in your profession some time. Never miss the opportunity of gaining novel experiences."

And Dallas went.

They crossed the hall, where the two stalwart footmen were dozing in big easy basket chairs, passed through a heavy door at the farther end with a tight-fitting green-baize-covered door behind it, down a long passage, through another big door, which the doctor opened with a pass key, into the working part of the establishment.

Here all was solid and grim. The extraordinary quiet of the doctor's house did not exist here. The sounds, strange and weird, were not obtrusively loud, they were muffled; but they were there, and Dallas began to wish he had remained behind.

They were passing a door, when the inmate commenced beating a furious tattoo on it with his fists. The occupants of some of the other rooms followed the example, and the corridor re-echoed with the muffled thunder.

A flame of anger flashed across the doctor's face. He dashed open the trap of the door where the noise had started, and said, angrily: "Silence!—at once!— or I will send for the strait waistcoat."

Dallas caught a glimpse of a man's face at the wicket, peering forth with wild, straining eyes, and he had an impression of a shaven, convict-like head.

With a thrill that shook him to his base, and left his knees a-trembling, Dallas recognised that the face was familiar to him. A light of responsive recognition flamed up into the wild eyes, and he could have sworn that the being inside was shouting his own name, when the doctor shot the wicket to with an angry oath.

"A bad case," he said, "a very bad case."

"Who in heaven's name was it ?" was the question pounding in Dallas's brain. "Who was it?—who was it?" The face was familiar, though, somehow, different. His brain was whirling confusedly after the answer to this riddle, when Sir James inserted his key into a door and flung it open.

"This is one of our punishment rooms, Mr. Dallas," he said, coolly. "You don't associate so much padding with a cell, do you?"

The doctor had entered, after touching an electric-light switch outside, and now stood in the centre of the padded room, looking round with an air of complacent approval.

"You couldn't hurt yourself here, however much you tried."

Dallas stepped inside, and looked round. Every inch of the walls and door and floor was thickly padded; it felt dreadfully oppressive. His brain was still painfully throbbing in its futile search for the connecting link between that face at the wicket and the someone in the outside world with

whom he was acquainted. Who was it? Who in heaven's name was it? His brain felt like bursting.

Suddenly he was aware that Sir James was addressing him. Something peculiar in the old man's tone sent another shock through him. He looked up.

"Put it on, Mr. Dallas—put it on." The old man was holding out to him a strange-looking garment made of strong canvas.

"Why, doctor, what is it?"

"Put—it—on,—Mr. Dallas! Do you hear me? Put — it — on — at once, or I will send for the keepers."

Dallas looked up with amazement; the fine old face was working with fury; the devil himself was gleaming out of the keen dark eyes. "Put —it—on!" he said again, with a snarl. "Put—it —on,

confound you, put—it—on !"

Then, in a flash, Dallas recognised two things.

The face at the wicket of that other room was the face of Sir Charles Dossall; and the old man in front of him, stamping in fury, was, for the time being, as mad as any of his own patients.

"Dossall! It was Sir Charles Dossall!" sprang to Dallas's lips, and then the doctor dashed at him. He stumbled, and in a moment Dallas slipped out of the room and slammed to the door, which closed with a vicious snap.

Dallas leaned panting against it. What was the meaning of it all? It was beyond him; but he must see Sir Charles again, if indeed it were really he. He listened at the door he was leaning against, but heard no sound; then he stole along to the door from which the face had peered, and slipped back the wicket. A face appeared there, but not the face he expected—not Sir Charles Dossall's—he had gone to the wrong door; but, good heavens! this was a face he knew better still, and the voice was the voice of Sir Revel Revell, and it said, "Dallas—Charley Dallas— thank God for the sight of you. Get me out of this? What in heaven's name is the meaning of it all?"

Before he could reply the door at the end of the corridor opened silently, and the old man Oswald appeared. He came noiselessly along, looking about questioningly for Sir James. Dallas closed the trap, and leaned for a moment against the wall to recover his balance. His heart was pounding like a sledge-hammer, and the blood surging up into his brain made him reel.

The old man came close up to him, his head and neck shaking threateningly from side to side, his deep-set eyes rolling, and his pent-house brows twitching in questioning, while a low guttural gurgle came from his throat.

Dallas braced himself up with an effort, and said as nonchalantly as he could, “Sir James is attending to his one of his patients. I am going back to the house,” and he strolled slowly away, curbing as best he could the mad impulse to dash through the door and out into the night.

He dared not turn round to look, but felt the old man's weird eyes following him. When he closed the door behind him on that hideous corridor, he felt as though he had awakened from a nightmare.

Then another fear confronted him—How was he to get out of the house? Those two big footmen in their basket chairs on either side of the hall were no merely spectacular adjuncts to the establishment, he could well imagine.

To enter on Sir James Dyne's invitation was one thing, to get out without his permission would probably prove a very different matter.

Dallas was quick-witted, however. He faced the difficulty, formed his plan, and acted on it at once. He saw at a glance that there was no chance of breaking out through the iron ribs of the

conservatory. He walked quietly up to the door leading to the house, then dashed through it, and through the passage beyond, shouting, "Help! Help! Quick—help! "—through the double doors, into the big hall. As he expected, the two footmen had sprung out of their chairs, and were ready for emergencies.

Dallas checked himself in the middle of the hall, and turned to rush back the way he had come, shouting excitedly, " Come on—quick—the Doctor is being murdered." The two men sprang forward and followed him. They saw him dash through the door into the conservatory, and almost fell over his prostrate body as they thrust through after him.

"Never mind me," he yelled, " go on— quick—you'll be too late."

Then in a moment, as they sped on, he was back in the passage in the hall—fumbling at the lock of the great front door. But it defied all his efforts. He dashed into the small waiting-room. There was no time to unfasten the window. The men might be back in a moment. He seized a chair, dashed it twice against the glass, scrambled through, losing flesh and clothing in his passage, and dropped into a rose-bush, with a fervent "Thank God."

The rain beat down on his hot head, and he was grateful. He had escaped from hell, and the cooling drops were as the water of life to him.

Now to get out of the grounds, and back to London with the least possible delay. He sped down the avenue. No good trying the great iron gates; he knew they were kept locked. When he saw the lodge looming in front he turned off into the shrubbery, and forced his way through— drenched to the skin by the showers he shook down—till a high stone wall barred his way.

"Sure to be glass on top," he said to himself. He slipped out of his coat, and, holding it by the tails, flung the collar over the top of the wall. At the third throw it caught, and, with the slight assistance it gave, he hauled himself up. He got over at last, badly cut about the knees and hands, and dropped into the road, dragging the remains of the coat after him.

Then he settled down into a steady run for the station—remembered that the last train had probably gone, and that in any case he would almost certainly be stopped as an escaped lunatic if he presented himself there—and turned off into the fields in the direction of the copper-coloured glow in the sky, and the distant roar, which represented London.

As he scrambled through the hedge a distant clang smote on his ears. It was the opening and closing of the iron gates of the lodge. He crouched low and endeavoured to stifle his quick panting. He heard the rapid pad of feet on the road, and in a minute two stalwart forms darted past in the direction of the station. He waited till they were out of hearing, then struck a bee-line for the coppery glow, through hedge and ditch, over field and furrow. What with mud and blood, and rain, and clothes in rags, he felt himself an awful object; but every step brought him nearer London, and brought rescue one step nearer to his friends.

At last, panting painfully, and thoroughly used up, he stumbled on to a high road. It ran the right way, and he followed it. He trudged and ran, and trudged again to recover breath. He seemed to have been on the go for hours, and doubted at last if his strength would hold out.

In time he came to scattered villas— then shops—and at last, thank heaven, a hansom rolling sleepily home to its suburban stable.

Dallas hailed it. The driver hesitated, and when he saw the dilapidated object before him he whipped up his tired horse and continued his homeward journey.

"Stop, man!" thundered Dallas, with all his remaining strength. "It's a matter of life and death, and here's a sovereign; another if you land me at Scotland Yard within half an hour."

The man backed up to the outstretched coin, took it, bit it, fumbled for a match, lighted it under his

cape, examined the coin, and flung open the doors with—

"Right y'are, guv'nor! Yer a rummy looking lot, but quids is quids. Where's the corpse?"

Dallas tumbled in, and they rumbled away.

The horse was worn out, and it was close on midnight when it stumbled up reeking like a lime-kiln to the door of Scotland Yard. Dallas flung up the other sovereign and limped up the steps.

A couple of stalwart policemen confronted him.

"I want the Commissioner, quick ! don't stand ramping about here. Take me up at once, and send up some brandy; I'm going to faint."

A sergeant beckoned to one of his men, who took Dallas's other arm, and between them they led him off upstairs.

He did faint before they reached the top, and when he came to he found himself lying in the Chief Commissioner's own armchair, with the taste of brandy in his mouth.

Sir Edward was regarding him with a somewhat quizzical smile.

"Well, Mr. Dallas, has the Junior Bar been dining out? What is this strange story the sergeant hints at?"

Dallas held out his torn hands and pointed to the wounds in his lacerated knees, and, looking steadily into the Chief Commissioner's face, said quietly—

"The Junior Bar doesn't run to this extreme even in its most hilarious moments, Sir Edward.

"Do you know Sir James Dyne's house at Barwood ?" he continued.

The Chief Commissioner nodded with an accession of interest.

"I got these wounds in escaping from the house two hours ago. In a padded cell there you will find Sir Revel Revell; in another, Sir Charles Dossall; probably Peacock is in another. It was touch and go that I am not in another."

The Commissioner had started from his seat in amazement, and was eyeing him keenly from below his knitted brows.

"This is an astounding story, Mr. Dallas."

"It is more than astounding; it's true. I want a search warrant; I want a dozen picked men, and I want to get back as quick as we can go."

The Commissioner touched a bell. Kerr the sergeant came in.

"A dozen of your best mounted men to be ready in five minutes, Kerr. I shall go myself. Order a spare horse for Mr. Dallas.

"Now just a question or two, Mr. Dallas. How came you at Sir James Dyne's?"

"He invited me to dinner." And he briefly told his story.

The Commissioner was evidently much exercised.

"How did you open the front door?" he asked, suddenly.

"I didn't; I smashed a window with a chair and tumbled through it."

"Which window?"

"Small room on right of hall." The Commissioner nodded.

"How did you pass the lodge?" he asked.

"I didn't try; I clambered over the wall. Hence the cuts. You seem to be acquainted with the place, Sir Edward."

"I dined there with Sir James last night, Mr. Dallas, and he took pride in pointing out the strength of his defences."

"Did he invite you to accompany him on his rounds?"

"He did, and I declined to go."

"Oh! I went!" said Dallas, feelingly.

Dallas borrowed a sergeant's cap and cape, and the cavalcade set off at a round trot for Barwood.

Of the rapid dash through muddy streets and still more muddy country roads Dallas remembered nothing beyond a feeling of intense weariness and of desperate anxiety. Grit or instinct kept him in the saddle, however, and it was only when the panting party drew rein at the lodge gates at Barwood that he fell forward on his horse's neck, completely used up.

Of the subsequent operations—of the strategy needed to effect an entrance into the stronghold, of the breaking in of cell doors amid the shrieks and moans of the inmates, of the discovery of Sir James dancing a wild dance of death on poor old Oswald's body on the floor of the padded room—he heard and saw nothing.

His next recollection was of lying on a sofa in the dining-room, and of the murmur of conversation arising from a small group of men sitting round a table on which were food and wine. The Chief Commissioner he knew—the others puzzled him. Their faces seemed familiar, but their heads were clean shaven, and each face wore a strange, pinched, anxious look, which he had never seen there before. Their costumes, too, were curious. On the whole, he decided that they were convicts. He raised himself on his elbow to examine them more closely, and they came forward to overwhelm him with thanks almost too deep for utterance—Sir Revel, Sir Charles, and Mr. Peacock.

Nothing more is necessary to complete this record of a strange episode than the account of their adventures by the three principal actors therein.

Sir Charles Dossall's statement was as follows:—

"After leaving the courts on the evening of July 14, Mr. Peacock, Q.C., who held a brief with me in a certain case, dined with me at my house.

"After dinner, we had a lengthy discussion on certain points arising out of the case, and Mr. Peacock left about eleven p.m.

"Fifteen minutes later a letter was handed in to me, which ran thus:—

"' Dear Sir Charles,—

"' We regret exceedingly to trouble you at this time of night, but our client is here at our offices, and has been here for some hours, in a state of frantic excitement, respecting the new line of defence you have developed in the last question of your cross-examination to-night. She insists on an interview, and makes some very remarkable statements. She absolutely declines to stir out of this office till she has seen you.

"' We have no option but to comply with her request, and beg of you to favour us with your presence for a few minutes.

"' We send our senior's brougham with this, to save you as much inconvenience as possible. Again apologising for the annoyance.

"' We remain, dear Sir Charles,

'" Yours obediently,

'" George & George, '"

Sir Charles Dossall. per H. G.'

"This was written on plain note paper, and bore the marks of extreme haste, but no suspicion as to its genuineness ever entered my head. I put on coat and hat, told the footman I would be back shortly, and left the house.

"A brougham stood a few paces off, an elderly footman closed the door on me as I entered, and we drove off.

"The night was warm, the brougham was oppressive. I tried to open the windows—first one, then the other—but they seemed to have got jammed. Then I remember no more till I found myself in a padded room, with my head shaved."

One of the birds ensnared, the capture of the others was easy.

The letter to Mr. Peacock arrived by the last postal delivery at night, and ran as follows:—

"My dear Peacock,—

"I am in a terrible mess; you can help me out. For old friendship's sake come to me. At eleven o'clock to-night a brougham will be waiting for you at the corner of Russell Square. To make sure you are right, say the single word 'Charles' to the driver, and he will touch his hat . three times. This must seem to you very melodramatic—even childish, perhaps. Unfortunately, it is unavoidable under the circumstances:

"Come to me without fail, I beg of you.

"Charles Dossall."

"I went," said Mr. Peacock. "I entered the brougham; and after that the record of Sir Charles's experiences is identical with my own."

With simply the necessary alterations, the letter which Sir Revel received, also by the last post, was identical with Mr. Peacock's. It also purported to come from Sir Charles.

An examination of the carriage showed that the windows and doors were absolutely unmovable from the inside, and that a simple but ingenious contrivance in the roof enabled the driver at any moment to drop upon the rider's face a chloroformed cloth.

All Sir James Dyne's patients, except the three Q.C.'s, seemed genuinely mad. Whether they were so when first they passed through the doors of Barwood will never be known.

The End